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I know I saved that information. It has to be around here somewhere. I wonder where I put it. I don't want to lose it.

If you want to save something, where might you put it?

I used to save information on a floppy disc on my computer. Then I used a hard disc built into my computer. Then came Zip drives, and now thumb drives. I know I didn't use any of those devices for my information. I used...now I remember...the cloud.

Cloud computing is a term first used in the 1990s to refer to information saved on a system of remote computers. It's a great way to backup information from one's own computer to some other location as an extra copy of your data. It can save your information in case your own computer crashes and you can't get your data from it. Having it in the cloud can help you reclaim what otherwise would be lost.

The writer of the letter called Hebrews also wrote about a cloud, but not in relation to computers. Instead, he referred to a cloud of

witnesses. He used the imagery while speaking of someone running a race, pushing aside any weight or distraction that could bog the runner down. The cloud of witnesses is like the crowd in the stands, cheering for the racers on the track as they strive to the finish line.

For the writer of Hebrews, the cloud contains all those faithful people who have run the race before us, beginning with the familiar names of Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Moses—the larger-than-life characters that fill the beginning stories of the Bible.

The list then shifts to a less well know person, Rahab the prostitute. Amidst all the starring names on this list, it seems a bit surprising that Rahab is on the list, not only because of her gender during a time when stories focused mostly on men, but her profession as well. Why would she be included?

If we dig into her story, we discover that she helped some visitors to her city that other residents wanted to capture. She hid them on her roof, and when the townspeople asked if the visitors were there, she sent the searchers on a wild goose chase

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in the wrong direction. She then let the visitors escape using a rope over the city wall. She modeled the value of hospitality—welcoming the stranger and protecting them. The visitors promised that if her city were ever captured, she would be saved.

The list then includes heroes of the faith that “toppled kingdoms, made justice work...were protected from lions, fires, and sword thrusts, turned disadvantage to advantage, won battles.”¹ Those running a race may feel encouraged by all these heroes cheering for them, all those winners in the stands. But then the list includes some surprising crowd members—those who were tortured, mocked, imprisoned with chains, stoned to death, or sawn in two. Why would all these people be in the stands cheering? They suffered. What do they know about winning?

That’s how we often think about life, don’t we? We want to cheer for the winners, and we want the victorious ones on our side. Whether it’s a sporting event, a political race, or our investment advisors, we want our interests to win. We want our team

composed of the best, not those who were persecuted or tortured.

The writer of this letter, however, sees all of them included in the cloud of witnesses, the winners and those often considered losers. All of them are cheering for the runners in the race, for there is a particular runner in the race that captures their attention. The letter proclaimed:

Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever.²

I wonder if the writer included such a diversity of people in this cloud of witnesses so we might find ourselves included as well, either in the race or one of the crowd members, cheering for everyone else. Whether we’re heroes or persecuted, winners or losers, victorious or suffering, famous or unknown, we’re all included. That’s comforting, isn’t it, which is something a local pastor experienced when he was invited to be a speaker at an event along with several famous dignitaries.

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Although he was grateful to be included, he felt a bit nervous, so he began by saying:

I have been a pastor, by the grace of God. If I could do it all over again, I would be a pastor. I have never, frankly, regarded myself as a scholar. I have tried to be studious, and I want to thank [you] for including me in this program today.

A farmer once put his mule in a horse race and his friends said to him, “Silly, that mule can’t run with those thoroughbreds.” The farmer said, “I know it, but you have no idea how good it makes him feel to be with all those horses!”³

Maybe you can recall being welcomed to an event or a race, wondering how you will fit. I remember watching many cross-country races when my children were in high school, for they both ran the 3-mile race through the woods, up and down hills, across the flat routes. Along with other parents, I would stand alongside the route, waiting to catch a glimpse of my child, hoping they would be near the front. I held my camera ready, hoping to catch them in action, but no matter where they were in the crowd of the many runners, I always cheered for them, regardless of how fast they ran.

That seems to be the message of this letter in the Bible, that Jesus encourages us all to run the race, no matter how fast we may go, no matter how ordinary we may feel. Even if we stumble and fall in the race, Jesus encourages us to try again. To continue the race. It’s not important whether we are first or even in the top ten. The crowd cheers for us anyway, encouraging us to keep our eyes on Jesus.

This letter was written during a time of persecution, when those in the church were experiencing many struggles, facing an uncertain future. We may not feel persecuted as a church, but we do face an uncertain future. Even though our crowd seems smaller than several years ago before Covid, each time we tell someone goodbye, the cloud of witnesses grows. Those faithful people continue to cheer us on, encouraging us to continue running the race, for we’re all connected to the cloud.

¹ Hebrews 11:33-34, *The Message Bible*

² Hebrews 12:2-3, *The Message Bible*

³ Hodgins, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #473.